

[By Gordon Dritschilo](#)

A federal rail official made no promises Monday but said she was impressed by Vermont's commitment to the western rail corridor.

Karen Rae, deputy administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, met with Gov. Peter Shumlin, Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., and business leaders from three counties in front of a crowd of more than 60 at the Franklin Conference Center. The audience was packed with members of the Legislature.

The meeting came as the federal government prepares to take applications for \$2.4 billion in rail money rejected by the state of Florida. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood decided to let other states compete for the money after Florida's rejection.

"In the current environment, that was a big, important step for him to make," Rae said. "It made a big difference to know you were there."

Rae said the administration will favor projects that are well thought out with "solid staff work."

"We think right now we're going to get 100 applications and that's with us telling everybody don't send anything that isn't ready to go," she said.

Shumlin and Welch reaffirmed their oft-repeated commitments to the project, which would extend the Ethan Allen Express. Shumlin said he envisioned a line running all the way to Montreal with a connecting spur to Boston. He said the governors of New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut are all onboard, as are provincial officials in Quebec.

Representatives of business organizations in Rutland, Addison and Chittenden counties each

talked about how the project would benefit development both by boosting tourism and also creating capacity for added freight.

Rae said she was limited in what she could say about Rutland's prospects, but spoke generally about what will make for a successful application.

"It will only happen if groups like yours and leadership like yours steps up to the table," she said. "What's going to make the difference is that businesses care, the chambers of commerce care, that community leaders and legislators care."

Rae said projects with an eye toward regional connectivity also get priority. She described how a group of eight Midwestern states did a joint application for a single project while another state submitted an application with about eight different visions for rail. The regional project got the money.